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DEPARTMENT FOR AF DAS YAMAMOTO AND AF/E
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM ET

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARLIAMENTARIANS CONTINUE EFFORTS TO
REGISTER CUDP PARTY

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES VICKI HUDDLESTON. REASON: 1.4 (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Parliamentarians leading the "Opposition Caucus" that represents ex-CUD MPs who have taken their seats in the House of People's Representatives are determined to form a new CUDP. (NOTE: The CUD was a coalition party that was disbanded after the elections in favor of the new CUDP, which was not registered by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), because Litedu Ayalew's UEDF-Medhin refused the coalition. END NOTE.) The CUD parliamentarians led by Temesgen Aewdie, the Opposition Caucus whip, said that they were determined to form a new CUD/P because they need a political party to conform to the rules of Parliament and to participate in a dialogue with the EPRDF. Temensgen said that they would support Ayele Chemiso, who is organizing the effort to bring the opposition into City Hall. Endalkachew Molla said that they disagreed with the jailed CUD leaders who rejected the possiblity of forming anew the CUDP. He likened the situation to that of Mandela who, despite being in prison, encouraged his party to continue the struggle.
END SUMMARY.

"STRUGGLE MUST CONTINUE" DESPITE "PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE"

¶2. (C) On April 1, AF DAS Amb. Donald Yamamoto, Charge Huddleston, AF/E desk officer William Schofield, and poloff Eric Wong met with Temesgen Zewdie, Mohammed Ali, and Endalkachew Molla, opposition members of Ethiopia's lower house of Parliament who are seeking to obtain government recognition of a new Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP). The CUDP espoused liberal democracy for development and peace, Temesgen said. He noted that it was necessary to establish the CUDP, as the NEBE had declared the CUD illegal.

Only two weeks remained for the CUDP to gather 1,500 signatures (40 per cent from Addis Ababa, 60 per cent from Ethiopia's other regional states) for submission to the NEBE by the Prime Minister's April 18 deadline. Endalkachew pleaded for recognition of the CUDP caucus in Parliament, which he said, with nearly 65 MPs, was the second-largest (behind only that of the ruling EPRDF coalition).

¶3. (C) Temesgen said he and other CUD MPs wished to engage in the democratic process. They oppose the CUD jailed leaders' demand that they be released prior to any engagement with government, whether through participation in Parliament or in running the City of Addis Ababa. While the detention of CUD leaders for "things they did not do" was objectionable, "the

struggle for peace, justice, and development must continue." The greater struggle for democracy must continue, without reference to the detention of individuals, he said. Endalkachew cited the example of Nelson Mandela's party continuing "to do its business" during his detention; political party organization had to continue, he said, although Hailu Shawel and others would continue to be considered as "prisoners of conscience." DAS Yamamoto urged Temesgen to continue with efforts to register the CUDP, and thus continue the struggle of the detainees, noting that Nehru had continued to make political preparations while Gandhi was imprisoned. While democratic reform could not occur without the release of the detainees, it was necessary to prepare for their reintegration into the political process, he said. Political and economic reform, as well as human rights, would be the focus of USG policy, Yamamoto said.

¶4. (C) Charge noted that DAS Yamamoto had been permitted to visit CUD chairman Hailu Shawel, mayor-elect Berhanu Nega, Mesfin Woldemariam, Gizachew Shiferaw, and Dr. Yacob Hailemariam on March 31 at Kaliti prison. She observed that they appeared to be in good health, and that Hailu, Mesfin, and Gizachew were each being held separately from each other. While the detainees opposed engagement with the GOE, and rejected efforts that did not include the detainees as illegitimate, they abjured violence, she said. Charge said that she pointed out that the GOE had indicated that an expression of remorse, or a change of attitude toward more cooperation could "make a difference" after trial for the detainees.

CUD "NOT EMPOWERED" IN PARLIAMENT

¶5. (C) Temesgen said that he and other CUD MPs faced difficulties in Parliament, despite promises from the Prime Minister of recognition because they were not formed as a political party. Although they had rejected CUD leaders' call to boycott Parliament, the Opposition Caucus MPs were "not empowered," and lacked "political space to debate issues of public interest," he said. Citing the ruling EPRDF coalition's majority in Parliament, Temesgen said the Opposition Caucus wanted to play a "significant policy role" but was not able to engage in meaningful debate, or to "engage significantly on political, economic, or social issues." Noting that he had lived for several decades in the United States, Temesgen underscored that he knew the important role opposition parties could play. He also cited GOE control of broadcast media, noting that the opposition needed access to radio and television, not the Internet, in order to reach the general population. Temesgen said the Opposition Caucus was being "undermined by the ruling party," as well as by the GOE's continued support for UEDP-Medhin leader Lidetu Ayalew.

¶6. (C) Charge observed that Prime Minister Meles agreed to meet informally with Temesgen, but for a dialogue with the EPRDF the Opposition Caucus would have to become a political party. The EPRDF refused the dialogue unless it was on a party-to-party basis. Current talks were ongoing with Bulcha Demeksa's Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM), and Dr. Beyene Petros's United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF). Temesgen noted that while the CUDP shared "common ground" with Beyene (e.g., favoring a policy of engagement with the GOE), the Opposition Caucus had its own "special interests" to raise with the Prime Minister, including not only the detention of CUD leaders, but also the continued closure (for nearly one year) of 47 businesses run by CUD supporters.

¶7. (C) Mohammed Ali noted that despite the Prime Minister's public declaration that CUD MPs could exercise political rights if they entered Parliament, "we are not allowed to do so." (NOTE: By the time the former CUD leaders entered Parliament, there was no longer a CUD party. As a result, they formed an "Opposition Caucus" to represent them. The Government claims that the Parliamentary rules do not allow

them to give the caucus its full representation, because UEDP-Medhin claims that the Opposition Caucus members who

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were formerly UEDP-Medhin may only be represented by UEDP-Medhin. END NOTE.) Temesgen pointed out that the ex-CUD offices remain closed, and some ex-CUD constituents continue to face harassment.

ENGAGEMENT MUST CONTINUE

¶18. (C) Despite these challenges, Temesgen expressed hope that they would meet the NEB's deadline for registration of the new CUDP. He underscored the necessity of continued engagement in order to build grassroots support, reopen regional offices, and prepare for local woreda-level elections. Temesgen welcomed DAS Yamamoto's suggestion that the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, or the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (NDI, IRI, and IFES) may be able to provide support for more political parties, as well as Charge's suggestion that USG-sponsored International Visitor programs and the VOA could help build capacity or support. Such assistance would be beneficial, Temesgen said, citing limited room for civil society. He also urged the USG to issue public statements in support of the formation of CUDP and the idea of engagement in the democratic process.

¶19. (C) While arguing for peaceful engagement, the opposition parliamentarians also complained that "here, we are afraid of our own government." Temesgen said that he believes in incremental, peaceful change. The release of jailed CUD leaders could not be a precondition for engagement, Temesgen said. "The struggle for CUDP... a struggle for liberty, freedom, peace, and development, must continue," he said. Mohammed Ali underscored the need to establish a new political culture for the next generation of youth, to highlight that political disputes could be solved peacefully, rather than through violent means.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: With 65 members, Temesgen's Opposition Caucus represents the majority of the 109 CUD parliamentarians elected to the federal House of People's

Representatives in May 2005 (some of whom have been jailed). The observations of Temesgen and his colleagues underscore that despite significant challenges they espouse a pragmatic approach: that engagement in the democratic process by forming a new political party will allow them to effectively represent their constituents in Parliament and run City Hall. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) DAS Yamamoto did not have the opportunity to clear this message prior to departing.

HUDDLESTON